

# Critical Thinking in Foreign Language Acquisition: A Study of the Italian Language Teaching

**Luca De Mori**, Burapha University, Thailand

**Anong Wisessuwan**, Retired professor, Chonburi, Thailand

**Chalong Tubsree**, Retired professor, Chonburi, Thailand

**Abstract:** *Critical thinking is one of the most sought after abilities for students in their learning institutions and workers in their work places. One of the subjects in which critical thinking skills might be developed is foreign language acquisition. According to existing literature, critical thinking might help learners to improve their knowledge of the target language. The main purpose of this research was to investigate the reactions of a group of advanced students at a major Thai university who experienced the introduction of critical thinking strategies in foreign language acquisition. In this particular study the target language was Italian. The paradigm of this research was social constructivism and the research approach was qualitative. The strategy of inquiry was phenomenology. The informants were 11 advanced students of Italian at Chulalongkorn University and 3 of their lecturers. In order to be selected for this research they had to satisfy a number of pre-determined requirements. Each of them gave his/her written consent to one-to-one, in depth interviews providing their insight on the matter under study. All informants signed a consent form before the interview. To protect their privacy they asked not to reveal their identity. The findings confirmed those of the existing literature: using critical thinking in foreign language acquisition, although it proved to be a difficult task for some students who had never previously experienced it, has been found to be effective and useful by most students and by all the lecturers to improve learners' skills, both in the target language and in critical thinking. Students and lecturers also agreed that critical thinking should be more widely used in Thailand for the positive effects it has on both skills.*

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, Reasoning, Problem solving, Foreign language acquisition and Foreign language teaching

## Statement and significance of the problem

Critical thinking is a resource not commonly used in Thai schools or even in Thai universities, so the number of studies regarding its implementation in Thai academic programs is limited. Most existing studies about critical thinking in the context of foreign language acquisition are concerned with English as the target language. As there are almost no studies regarding critical thinking in learning Italian as a foreign language, this research will give a minor contribution to the knowledge and implementation of critical thinking in foreign language acquisition. Even if in this particular case the language object of the study is a niche language like Italian, the study might be a step in the direction of studying the effects of using and implementing critical thinking skills in learning any other foreign languages.

## Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study were the following:

1. To investigate the students' reactions (both positive and negative) when experiencing critical thinking in advanced classes of Italian as a foreign language.
2. To explore the relationship and influence of these reactions to the effectiveness of critical thinking in learning Italian as perceived by the students.
3. To investigate the students' opinions about using an American and western approach like critical thinking in an Asian and Thai context.

4. To investigate the lecturers' teaching strategies and opinions about using critical thinking in language learning.

### Research Questions

1. What was the Thai students' perception of their personal experience of using critical thinking in the acquisition of Italian as a Foreign Language?
2. According to the same students, is critical thinking applicable and useful in the context of foreign language acquisition?
3. According to the same students, is critical thinking successfully applicable in a Thai context?
4. What critical thinking teaching strategies had been employed by instructors at the Section of Italian - Department of Western Language of Chulalongkorn University?

### Literature Review

CT never had a single definition universally accepted; in fact, often even scholars from the same field do not share the same opinion about what exactly critical thinking is or how to define it. The theory of critical thinking is very old. Traditionally the Greek philosopher Socrates is considered to be the father of critical thinking. He is known to have created the so-called Socratic Method, a special kind of dialogue between teacher and students that used reasoning to analyze different opinions and refute weak ones. In modern times the American Philosophical Association described the ideal critical thinker as a flexible and open-minded person, able to consider other people's opinions and points of views, someone who was able to suspend his/her judgment if unable to get sufficient information, or "... *judging in a reflective way what to do or what to believe*" (Facione, 2000, p. 61). Cognitive psychologists who follow the behaviorist tradition tend to focus their attention more on what people do in their real life, and not on how people should think in theory. According to this school of thought, critical thinkers should be able to see "... *both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms your ideas...*" (Willingham, 2007, p. 8). Scholars belonging to the field of cognitive psychology usually define critical thinking providing examples of the behaviors displayed by critical thinkers or the kind of actions that they are able to perform (Lewis & Smith, 1993).

The third classical approach to critical thinking is the so-called educational approach. Scholars belonging to this school of thought tend to follow Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956 and revised versions), which includes six levels of abilities listed in hierarchical order. Critical thinking can be defined by the three highest thinking levels, defined as "analyzing, evaluating and creating" in the revised taxonomy (Overbaugh and Schultz, 2015). Other scholars have different approaches to the problem. Some tend to focus on a more practical definition: "*Critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do*" (Ennis, 1987). This definition is completed by a long list of abilities (available skills) and dispositions (willingness to implement said abilities) that critical thinkers should possess. The problem of this approach is the complexity of the taxonomy and the difficulty to establishing a practical way to evaluate if those abilities and dispositions really exist and are really applied in real life situations. (Baron and Sternberg Eds., 1987, pp. 9-26).

In the field of Human Research Development (HRD) learning is traditionally highly esteemed. Among the ten assumptions of the learning paradigm proposed by Swanson, those which are more connected with critical thinking are the following:

**Learning Paradigm Assumption 3:** *The primary purpose of HRD is development of the individual... the primary goal of HRD ... is to help individuals achieve their full potential.*

**Learning Paradigm Assumption 5:** *Organizations are best advanced by having fully developed individuals.*

**Learning Paradigm Assumption 6:** *Individuals should control their own learning process. ... Individuals are presumed to have the inherent capacity and motivation to direct their own learning in a way that is most beneficial to them.* (Swanson and Holton, 2009, p. 147/149)

The analysis of these assumptions reveals that critical thinking might help workers to develop their full potentials; that is defined in assumption 3 as “*the primary purpose of HRD*”. Even more important for the connection between critical thinking and the field of HRD is assumption 6, which underlines the significance of having a work force able to take active control of their own learning and to use it for their own advantage. Of course not all scholars agree on the positive role of HRD in the field of training and development. Some scholars noted that organizations might make “... *use of training and development as a ‘fix-it’ solution for what is often entrenched organization dysfunction...*” (Elliott and Turnbull, 2005, p. 2).

Others noted that CT can be a double edged sword, as it provides workers with the knowledge and the tools that might be used against the authorities, because sometimes “*People who are taught to think critically often question established wisdom or even the authorities who are in charge*”. (Wagner, 2012, p. 38).

Talking about the relationship between critical thinking and foreign language acquisition, several scholars suggested a number of reasons to implement it. Learners of any foreign language can use critical thinking to develop their own metacognitive abilities and to help students change their role in the language classroom. Instead of being just passive recipients of what their instructors teach them, they can play a more active role in their own learning experience, evaluating their own progress (self-evaluation) and improving their vocabulary. It can also help learners to understand not only the explicit meaning of statements, but also the implicit ones, those which are “between the lines”. Several researches have confirmed that teaching of critical thinking skills has a positive influence on competence in L2 writing (Liaw 2007; Shahini and Riazi 2010; Gibson 2012). Many scholars noted that the best way to help learners develop critical thinking and foreign language abilities at the same time was the so-called “content teaching”. It is a way of teaching in which learners are provided with meaningful contents in the context of the foreign language class, asking students to read, analyze and criticize those contents using the target language. “*Understanding content in a profound way was dependent on a deep understanding of target vocabulary ...discerning thoughts related to content material*”. (Gibson, 2012, p. 136). In fact, “*Reading is not merely a receptive process of picking up information from the page in a word-by-word manner*” (Grabe, 1991, p. 1).

The mutual relationships existing between critical thinking skills and proficiency in a foreign language can be summarized as follows: They “*feed each other*”. (Brumfit, Myles, Mitchell, Johnston & Ford, 2005, p.158).

## Research Methodology

### - Research Design and Instrument

This study was made using a qualitative approach with social constructivism as paradigm or worldview. The strategy of inquiry used in this research was phenomenology. The choice of a phenomenological strategy of inquiry for this study was due precisely to the fact that it focused on exploring the essence of a particular phenomenon: the students’ experiences and

reactions to critical thinking in foreign language acquisition and how those experiences influenced their opinion of critical thinking. Phenomenological studies explore the consciousness in human experiences using long, non-structured interviews with a number of selected informants till data saturation. Data saturation is considered to be reached when all research questions have been answered, and/or when new interviews do not provide any relevant data or any new information.

- **Informants**

In this particular case the informants were 11 students of the course “Italian 5” at the Section of Italian, Department of Western Languages, Chulalongkorn University and 3 of their lecturers.

- **Criteria for selecting research informants**

There was no need to purposefully select the informants, as all of them satisfied the requirements determined for taking part in the research; the students needed to:

- Have a good knowledge (at least B1) of the target language that could allow them to express easily their feelings, thoughts and opinions;
- Have attended all or most of classes in which critical thinking techniques and exercises had been used;
- Be willing to take part in the research giving their written consent to be interviewed by the researcher.

The lecturers had to satisfy the following requirements:

- They had to be lecturers of Italian at Chulalongkorn University
- They had to be knowledgeable about critical thinking
- They had to have used critical thinking in their courses
- They had to be willing to take part in the research as informants.

## Data collection and data analyses

The data collection for this research was made primarily by recording the one-to-one, unstructured interviews with those informants and by observing the same informants during the interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were then analyzed by the method of coding. The process of data analysis and interpretation adopted in this research has followed the model proposed by Creswell (2009).

## Results

In the process of data analysis the Moustakas’s (1994) method for conducting qualitative phenomenological research has been used to find the meaning units of the experiences, organize the units into themes, and blend the units and themes into a description of the participants’ experiences. This study was conducted by one researcher only.

### Presentation and description of findings regarding the first research question.

The first research question was the following: *What was the Thai students’ perception of their personal experience of using critical thinking in the acquisition of Italian as a Foreign Language?*

The analysis of the data regarding this question revealed these four main themes:

Theme	First research question
1	Lack of previous experience with critical thinking
2	Problems and difficulties with critical thinking in general
3	Usefulness of critical thinking as mind opener in everyday life
4	Suggestions and advices to fellow students and lecturers

Theme 1: Lack of previous experience with critical thinking.

Regarding this theme all 11 students declared they had no previous experience whatsoever with critical thinking not only during their high school years but also at the university. Many informants even added that they had even never heard the expression “critical thinking” before their Italian courses at the university. Some examples of student’s direct quotations regarding this point include the following: “... *We did not care that much about the subjects because they were not so interesting or we did not ask too much*” (Student 1); “*At school we learned from teachers and the books, and we had to read and remember and ... do exams and then we forgot everything ...*” (Student 2).

Theme 2: Problems and difficulties with critical thinking in general

Regarding this theme some students spoke about the difficulties they experienced with critical thinking. Several students remarked that they were unfamiliar with it even in their native language, let alone in a foreign one. The followings are opinions provided by students: “*I think it's quite challenging for us, like we have to read and answer passages that we have never seen before and she would ask us some questions ...like we have no time to search on the Internet or something like that*” (Student 8).

Theme 3: Usefulness of critical thinking as mind opener in everyday life.

Regarding this theme all students noted the advantages in using critical thinking in real life. Some expressed their awareness of how easily they can be manipulated and how much we all need to be more aware of hidden meanings, agendas and biases in what we read and listen.

These are viewpoints from students:

“*I think it is useful for everyone, because is not just only about classes or academic achievement, but it is also about the way that we live. ...without critical thinking skills as I said you cannot make a good human being*” (Student 2); “*... I mean critical thinking maybe helps you to take a decision more easily and maybe correctly*” (Student 3).

Theme 4: Suggestions and advices to fellow students and lecturers regarding critical thinking.

Regarding this theme all students provided some suggestions both for future students of Italian and for the lecturers of the same subject: “*Students ... should be able to discuss about a topic using their own ideas ... because in that way they ... change from being a passive learner to an active learner...*” (Student 2); “*I would suggest them that you should study every subject with critical thinking because I think it's more useful than you learning like grammar, ... even if it's really hard*” (Student 4).

### **Presentation and description of findings regarding the second research question.**

The second research question was the following: *According to the same students, is critical thinking applicable and useful in the context of foreign language acquisition?*

The analysis of the data regarding this question revealed these two main themes:

Theme	Second research question
1	<b>Problems and difficulties with CT in foreign language acquisition</b>
2	<b>Advantages and usefulness of using CT in foreign language acquisition</b>

Theme 1: Problems and difficulties with critical thinking in foreign language acquisition

Regarding the second research questions most informants agreed that critical thinking could be applied with positive results in foreign language acquisition, but a few students

expressed some reservation about it. Usually students who were extroverts and spoke Italian more fluently showed more enthusiasm for this activity. On the contrary students who were introverts or with a lower self-esteem, and who felt less at ease discussing in Italian in front of their instructors and friends expressed more reservations. Some skeptical expressions from the student informants: *“In Asian countries critical thinking is not part of the way we learn here...”* (Student 2); *“In high school ...teacher never taught us about critical thinking”* (Student 8); *“I can't elaborate the ideas well enough, it's like...I still think like ordinary people...”* (Student 4); *“You have to be good at that language, enough to think critically in that language”* (Student 9).

Theme 2: Usefulness of using critical thinking in foreign language acquisition:

Regarding this theme the vast majority of the students expressed a positive opinion towards critical thinking in foreign language acquisition and listed some of the advantages they noted in learning Italian using critical thinking activities. On the contrary, three students out of eleven expressed some reservations in this regard. The reasons they gave to justify such an attitude were mainly connected with the difficulties they experienced in reconciling the complicated process of learning a foreign language with the equally complex process of this unfamiliar approach:

#### **A Positive opinions from students**

*“I think that critical thinking is still very useful for language acquisition because it's sort of like you can train your brain to think more...”* (Student 2); *“I think not only in Italian, but in every other language... can improve our thinking”* (Student 6); *“Both grammar and language are skills. Critical thinking is skills. It's quite hard to practice two skills at the same time, but ... skills can be developed.”* (Student 7); *“I think it's very useful... if you get the chance to combine learning languages and critical thinking it's better”* (Student 8);

#### **B Skeptic opinions from students**

*“... if you just memorize lessons we would forget everything”* (Student 8). Three students expressed some reservations: *“I think that critical thinking is good, but I think that learning Italian and critical thinking are not connected together...”* (Student 4); *“I think it's not much related... if I want to study Italian I have to know the grammar and vocabulary...”* (Student 5); *“I think...it's useful, but not much...”* (Student 9).

### **Presentation and description of findings regarding the third research question.**

The third research question was the following: *According to the same students, is critical thinking successfully applicable in a Thai context?*

The analysis of the data regarding this question revealed these three main themes:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Third research question</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Difference between Thai/Asian society and Western society</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Obstacles to the introduction of CT in Thai schools/university</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Reasons to promote the introduction of CT in Thai schools/university</b>

Regarding the third research questions all students agreed that critical thinking could profitably be applied and used in a Thai context, even if it is (or it appears to be) something alien to Asian culture and worldview. Some even have gone so far to suggest the urgent need to implement critical thinking in an Asian context and Thai, because they are lacking of it. Followings are students' observations:

*“It's the mindset of Thai people... it's like that... we have to obey this and that... if you think differently that's not right.”* (Student 1); *“Here social classes is very hierarchical ...it's quiet hard to get the chance to criticize their teachings and what they do”* (Student 2); *“... when Thai people read the news on the television... they do not consider if this is true or*

not” (Student 4); *“In Thailand there are more than 40 or 50 students in the class and I think it is hard to ask all students about their opinions....”* (Student 8); *“Thai people ... they judge things... from just looking... they don't use critical thinking”* (Student 10).

Some students provided examples of the differences they found between themselves and foreign students: *“(My friends) from Finland and from Germany... they were always criticizing things... they came and they were able to produce thoughts in a very critical way which I couldn't ...”* (Student 2); *“I think it would be more difficult here, because in the Western world they seem like they have already got used to it”* *“In Asia and in Thailand ... we learn only in the classrooms.”* (Student 9); *“I think Western culture is student-centered ... but in Thailand ... it is teacher-centered”* (Student 11).

Some examples of student’s opinions regarding the resistance to critical thinking (from teachers, lecturers, educators, families, politicians) include: *“I think it's a long time to make the parents and teachers to understand this way...”* (Student 3). Several students agreed that critical thinking is good to improve people’s reasoning abilities and to create better citizens: *“I think I learnt... to care more about morality or ethics, because sometimes in the past I didn't care so much about social problems...”* (Student 1); *“Thai students don't know the right way to fix a problem... I mean critical thinking maybe helps you to take a decision more easily and maybe correctly”* (Student 3); *“Critical thinking will adapt to my future career, my life and career...”* (Student 4); *“We have many sources of information... but how do we compare, how do we decide which information is true? Critical thinking for me is ....to distinguish the truth and the falsehood”* (Student 7); *“When I have to be interviewed for job, I think that it can make me different from the others... and we will get more chances at work...”* (Student 8).

#### **Presentation and description of findings regarding the fourth research question.**

The fourth research question was the following: *What critical thinking teaching strategies had been employed by instructors at the Section of Italian - Department of Western Language of Chulalongkorn University?*

The analysis of the data regarding this question revealed these five main themes:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Fourth research question</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Kind of courses in which critical thinking was used, with rationale for such a choice</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Approach used by the lecturers in class with students</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Perceived students’ reactions to critical thinking in university courses</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Problems encountered by lecturers in implementing critical thinking in their courses</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Lecturers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of critical thinking in their respective courses</b>

As far as the fourth question is concerned, the lecturers provided examples on how they implemented critical thinking in their classes: among others they provided students with articles with different or opposing viewpoints about the same matter asking them to take a side and defend their position. Other techniques involved asking students to tell apart facts and opinions in a given text or identify fallacies and weak points into statements. All the

lecturers expressed a positive opinion of their experience. According to the lecturers, the rationale for deciding in which courses it was appropriate to introduce critical thinking depended on the followings:

- a) Courses in which students were supposed to take part in discussions and debates;
- b) Courses in which it was possible to provide enough material (newspaper articles, magazines, statistics, graphics, etc.) to stimulate students' interests and motivation;
- c) Courses that only students with a pre-determined level of knowledge of the target language could attend.

### **Suggestions from the lecturer informants**

The lecturers also noted that the choice of materials/texts to be used in the course was extremely important to improve interest and motivation among students. *"The choice of the material... is not an easy one. In fact, you have to be careful not to choose material that is too difficult and can discourage some students. On the other hand, the same material must not be too easy...I also used articles taken from newspapers with opposing views on news... I tried to involve students in conversations and activities using material that could be of interest to them"*. Lect3.

Regarding the difficulties in implementing this way of teaching, lecturers also noted that *"...most students were not really happy with this way of learning. They are more used to the traditional approach of lectures and exams in which they basically have to memorize and repeat what the instructors tell them. Apparently nobody asked them before to analyze, criticize or put in doubt what they learnt. And that request was something new and confusing for the students."* Lect3. Nevertheless, lecturers were satisfied with the progress their students made: *"We saw improvement...if you look at students individually, personally, you see improvements"*. Lect1. *"I have to say that I was favorably impressed by several students..."* Lect2. *"I have to say that several students improved during class activities...Most of them at the end of the course knew how to analyze texts, identify logical fallacies or hidden meanings. They understood the importance of evaluating the sources and contents of news or texts..."* Lect3

### **Findings and Conclusions**

The process of coding, grouping codes into families, analysis of meaning, frequency and significance of the informants' views provided the researcher with a significant amount of information regarding the student's perception of their learning experience with critical thinking in foreign language learning and the lecturers' approach to it.

#### **1. Findings of the first research question**

Regarding the first research questions the vast majority of the students regarded their learning experience with critical thinking as positive and meaningful. Even the few (3 out of 11) who expressed some reservations regarding the effectiveness of using critical thinking to improve foreign language skills, at some later stage of their respective interviews expressed appreciation for the results of this activity. From the analysis of the students' interviews the first common characteristic was their lack of experience with critical thinking in previous university courses. Several students also expressed their worries due to the double task they had to face. On one side they had to practice critical thinking, which is a hard task in itself. They had to analyze complex material and articles with opposing viewpoints and they had to choose and defend one of the positions expressed in the articles. Students also had to perform all CT activities in a foreign language, without having time to prepare themselves or to use a dictionary. Even the best students found themselves in uncharted territories, far from their familiar comfort zone in which they just had to memorize and repeat the lecturer's words.



The students' personality was another determining factor in their response to these activities. Extroverted students expressed a more positive perception of CT activities. Of course the opposite was also true: shy students were much more likely to express doubts about critical thinking than their self-confident counterparts.

## **2. Findings of the second research question**

The majority of the students agreed that CT is not only applicable but also useful in the context of foreign language acquisition. Some noted that they become more aware of the limits of their knowledge of the target language. In fact, when learners are confronted only with simple tests purposely created for foreigners and with familiar tasks and activities, they might easily overestimate their knowledge of the target language. CT and learning a foreign language are two intellectual activities which work synergistically to the development of both skills. But 3 students out of 11 expressed reservations about the usefulness of CT in the context of language learning, even if later they seemed to review their position. These 3 students found that the idea of mixing the process of language learning with the even more stressful process of developing critical skills was too difficult for them. Interestingly the same students later expressed appreciation for CT when they considered the issue from a more practical point of view, for example how to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources or texts.

In conclusion, regarding the second research questions, the vast majority of the students accepted without reservation the applicability of CT in foreign language acquisition and agreed that CT is indeed useful to improve the overall knowledge of the target language.

## **3. Findings of the third research question**

The vast majority of the students agreed that CT not only could but rather should be successfully introduced and used in a Thai and Asian context, even considering the differences between Thailand and Asia and the Western countries. Some regretted the fact that in Thailand students are not encouraged to think. The students also expressed their awareness that the different context implied more difficulties in the implementation of CT, due to the resistance to change from a variety of social institutions, family, school authorities, teachers, politicians, etc.

In conclusion, according to the student informants, CT is successfully applicable in a Thai context.

## **4. Findings of the fourth research question**

Lecturers provided details regarding how and with which material they introduced critical thinking in their classes of Italian. They agreed that students must be prepared in advance to the new tasks, the right material must be chosen and that it takes time for all students to get involved in this way of learning.

In conclusion, they noted improvements among the students and positive results from their teaching; they also expressed the intention to continue using CT in their courses in the future.

## **Points for discussion**

In discussing the findings relating to this research, all informants perceived CT as a completely new activity and some of them considered it to be difficult or very difficult. Students remarked that in high school only had to memorize what teachers taught them and were not supposed to criticize or ask questions; in fact this behavior was seen as an attitude of defiance and disrespect towards teachers. Anyway it must be highlighted that the vast majority of the students expressed a positive or very positive overall perception of this particular learning experience; they also accepted without reservations the applicability of CT in foreign language acquisition. The informants agreed with existing literature: providing learners with texts from different sources and use them to make students analyze and discuss using the target language is considered by many scholars as a much more powerful learning

tool than the traditional way of teaching. Students also considered CT as very useful to develop their deep reading and reasoning abilities, helping them to identify fallacies and hidden meanings in the texts and to recognize the communicative intention of the authors. Finally students agreed that CT could and should be applied and implemented in the Thai context and expressed their hope that CT will continue to be used and promoted in Thailand.

### Implications from the findings and future research studies

The majority of the studies regarding CT in foreign language acquisition is concerned only with English as the target language. Even if this study regarded Italian as the target language, the findings can be generalized to any other foreign language, including English. This study confirmed the findings of similar studies: CT is indeed applicable and useful to improve logical and language skills in foreign language learners. The main problem with existing studies is that they usually do not consider the point of view of the students when facing critical thinking activities in a foreign language. Another characteristic of the present research is that it compares the two different points of views of learners and their instructors. In fact only taking into account the two opposing sides is possible to create a more complete picture of a phenomenon and analyze in depth all its aspects. Although this research has confirmed the findings of the existing literature, it is necessary to carry out further studies to substantiate the results obtained. A good way to do so would be to investigate the perceived and real effectiveness of critical thinking in foreign language acquisition with a larger number of informants.

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